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SUBJECT: ROYALIST PARTIES PLAN TO MERGE FOR 2013 NATIONAL ELECTION

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¶1. (U) National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) and Norodom Ranariddh Party (NRP) officials announced May 15 that the two royalist parties had set aside their differences and planned to formally merge under the FUNCINPEC name and brand. FUNCINPEC Secretary General Nhek Bun Chhay told the press that the creation of the new, single party would wait until the run-up to the 2013 national election, so that FUNCINPEC and NRP officials would avoid having to forfeit existing government positions. He added that the parties would act as a single unit but maintain their separate names until the merger.

COOPERATION IN LOCAL ELECTIONS A PRECURSOR TO MERGER

¶2. (SBU) FUNCINPEC and NRP officials had hinted for months that a merger was in development, and the parties took a small step towards reunification by cooperating in the May 17 provincial, district and local elections. The parties submitted a joint list of candidates in 14 provinces for the election, in which Cambodia's 11,353 commune councilors voted for provincial, district and municipal councils. Royalist candidates in each district ran under the banner of the party that had the most commune councilors. FUNCINPEC's official in charge of election affairs, Kem Kosal, told us in March that the parties had had no issues coordinating on the candidate lists. However, in spite of the public emphasis placed on the royalist parties' cooperation, FUNCINPEC President Keo Puth Rasmey admitted to the Ambassador in February that the local elections were not a high priority for his party, as no one expected a drastic change in any party's representation.

¶3. (SBU) Koul Panha, Executive Director of the Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL), similarly told Poloff that the royalist party alliance had made little difference in the May 17 election results, as the commune councilors had tended to vote along party lines. However he speculated that a full merger could improve the royalist parties' chances of picking up additional National Assembly (NA) seats in the 2013 national elections. The parties' challenges, he added, would be to put aside past disputes and figure out how to blend their respective structures and institutions. He observed that FUNCINPEC officials seemed to be more eager to merge than NRP officials, who still distrusted FUNCINPEC's leadership, specifically Secretary General Nhek Bun Chhay. Puthea Hang, the Executive Director of the Neutral and Impartial Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (NICFEC), raised similar concerns about the merger, saying that he feared the parties could end up splitting again.

CPP, SRP UNIMPRESSED

¶4. (SBU) Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) officials have shown little reaction so far to the royalist party merger announcement. CPP lawmaker Cheam Yeap told the press May 18 that his party was not concerned about the merger because the strength of the royalist parties' support was known. SRP spokesman Yim Sovann added that FUNCINPEC and the NRP had compromised their

credentials by aligning themselves with the ruling party, and suggested that the Cambodian people would no longer trust the royalist parties. (NOTE: FUNCINPEC still declares itself to be in coalition with the CPP, and Nhek Bun Chhay is a Deputy Prime Minister. However, FUNCINPEC Deputy President Prince Sisowath Sirirath admitted to Poloff in January that since the 2008 national elections there is no longer a Memorandum of Understanding between the two parties to formalize this coalition. END NOTE.)

SOME NRP MEMBERS ALSO UNIMPRESSED

15. (SBU) The proposed royalist merger has failed to inspire some of the NRP's officials, as well. Internal NRP rifts that surfaced in February reappeared on May 14, just prior to the provincial and district elections, when NRP Spokesman Suth Dina called for NRP commune councilors to vote for the CPP. Suth Dina praised the CPP for improving the country's prosperity and criticized the NRP for lacking a political structure and policies. (NOTE: NRP Secretary General You Hockry has admitted these same faults about his party privately to Poloff, but has never publicly acknowledged them. END NOTE.) Suth Dina was temporarily expelled from the NRP in February for allegedly trying to stage a takeover of the party with fellow members of his political activist group, the Democratic Front of Khmer Students and Intellectuals. NRP leadership made a show of reconciliation with Suth Dina later that month, but he now appears to have set himself up to defect to the CPP.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) FUNCINPEC and the NRP's latest move was long predicted by

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independent observers and represents the royalist movement's natural last-ditch effort to maintain its political relevance. If the parties can truly overcome their turbulent pasts, identify strong and charismatic leaders, and outline a solid political platform, they may be able to inspire enough support to pick up additional NA seats in the 2013 national election. However, given royalist party officials' outsized egos, coupled with their tendencies to reflect on their glory days of yore rather than a clear message for the future, a merger may be their last significant political act.

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